



Dealing with Caregiver Stress

You may not be able to eliminate the causes of stress right now, but you can work to manage the stress in a healthy way.

Caregivers have great responsibilities, and one of the responsibilities that should be at the top of their lists is to maintain their own mental and physical health. You can't provide optimal care if you aren't as healthy as you can be.

Stress is our body's and mind's reaction when we feel frightened, threatened, or overwhelmed. Our adrenal glands pump out adrenaline, which sets our defenses in motion (fight or flight):

Heart pounds, BP increases, muscles tense, pupils dilate

Stress may appear as aches and pains, palpitations, headaches, anxiety, fatigue, crying, under- or over-eating, or frequent infections.

Certain traits may add to your stress. See if you recognize yourself:

- Perfectionism—puts pressure on your
- Control—do you always have to be in control?
- People pleasing—do you worry about others' opinions
- Poor self-perception—do you feel you don't do a good enough job?

You are in this for the long haul. Just like a marathoner, you need to pace yourself: rest when you can. The needs of person you are caring for are likely to increase over time.

BURNOUT

- Being aware of the sources and symptoms of stress is important so you can prevent burnout. Although signs of burnout vary from one person to another, here are some of the most common to watch for:
 - Physical—Continual exhaustion, inability to get enough rest, susceptibility to illnesses and frequent accidents.

- Emotional—Impatience, irritability, forgetfulness, inability to experience enjoyment.
- Coping—Denial of burnout symptoms, increased compulsive or addictive behavior (like smoking or drinking), fewer social contacts, discontinuing hobbies or recreational activities.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

- Drink plenty of water and eat nutritious snacks. Hunger and dehydration can provoke aggressiveness and magnify feelings of anxiety.
- Get outside for a brief break. Even 5 minutes on the patio or balcony can be rejuvenating.
- Check your posture. Bad posture, stooping or slumping can lead to muscle tension, pain, and stress. Check troublesome muscle groups and break up tension.
- Keep high quality, nutritious foods around that need little or no preparation (think fruit). Eat slowly and try to stay away from too much junk food.
- Walking or other exercise releases tension and frustration. It's hard to stay tense when doing yoga or walking. It can also ease fatigue.

ANGER AND FRUSTRATION

- When becoming annoyed or angry, practice letting go. Make a conscious choice not to become upset. Anger wastes energy. Anger management is a stress-buster.
- Breathe slowly and deeply. Before you react to a situation, take 3 deep breaths and release them slowly. If time allows, try meditation, guided imagery, or a relaxation techniques.
- Practice speaking more slowly than usual next time you are stressed. You can think more clearly and react more reasonably. Stressed people talk fast and breathlessly.
- Get anger out by writing in a journal, exercising or pretending to tell off your boss when you are alone in the car.
- Have a good cry.

CARE FOR YOURSELF

- Let go of unrealistic goals in the grand scheme of things, how important is it that the floor isn't waxed, the weeds didn't get pulled, or you couldn't manage Thanksgiving dinner from scratch.
- Listen to relaxing music.
- Drive slowly.
- Work in the garden.
- The support of others is a great stress reducer. Talk with friends, other caregivers, a pastor or other person sympathetic to your circumstances.
- Set limits on what you are willing and able to do.
- There are relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation and visualization that are easily learned. There are recordings you can buy to help you with this.
- A sense of humor can help get you through some tough times. Treat yourself and the resident to laughs and hugs whenever you can. Cuddling pets is another excellent way to decrease stress.

REWARD YOURSELF

- Plan something rewarding for yourself—a bath, a book, a movie—something to look forward to.
- Be playful. Dance, sing, play with Play-Doh. Be a kid for a while.
- Splurge on a massage or a pedicure.
- Try aromatherapy. 5 or 6 drops of lavender oil in a bath or on a cloth you can inhale several times a day may be relaxing and soothing.
- Daydream.

OTHER THOUGHTS

- Choose one simple thing you have been putting off (such as returning a call, making a doctor's appointment). Then just do it. Immediately. No thinking. This can improve your attitude. It feels good to cross things off a list.
- Take baby steps. The whole thing may be overwhelming, but a baby step is manageable.
- Think about whether this is the rainy day you saved for. Can you hire some help, even for a short time.
- Accept the help of those who offer it. Ask for help. Others may assume you don't need help if you don't say anything.

REFRESH YOUR SPIRIT

- Most of us need spiritual as well as physical and emotional renewal. You may find it helpful to visit your place of worship, listen to tapes of services, or read or listen to inspirational messages. You may want to set aside some quiet moments for prayer or reflection.

Do something today to care for your mind, body or spirit.

And don't forget that STRESSED spelled backwards is DESSERTS.

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